Recentring postcolonial imaginaries in North America: Putting theory into practice through #decolonize

Postcolonial theory has been a relative latecomer to the cloistered world of international relations (IR). In 2002, Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair’s edited volume *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations* and LHM Ling’s *Postcolonial International Relations* both marked an important turn towards interrogating the ethnocentric, imperialising and racialised geographies of IR’s mainstream (see also Agathangelou and Ling, 2009; Doty, 1996; Grovogui, 2009; Henderson, 2007; Jones, 2006; Shilliam, 2011; Vitalis, 2010). A similar scholarship has emerged within nationality and citizenship studies in Canada (Bannerji, 2000; Razzaq, 2002; Thobani, 2007) and among indigenous scholars who directly challenge the problematics of sovereignty, racial formation and territorial consolidation as they relate to Anglo-American settler states (Amadahy and Lawrence, 2009; Anderson, 2001; Lawrence, 2004; Lawrence and Dua, 2005; Shaw, 2008; Smith, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

What these academic interventions achieve is the rendering of a radically different global geography, enabling scholars to reimagine the world’s remaining settler colonies in both precolonial and postcolonial terms. This echoes the project that #decolonize forwarded on the streets by drawing attention to the unceded, stolen and occupied nature of North American lands themselves (Montano, 2011; Yee, 2011). In fact, #occupy’s elision of these themes is echoed in IR’s own
silence concerning the string of broken international treaties between indigenous peoples and North American settler states, including acts of direct dispossession and the multiple genocides that this process entails. Such silences serve to naturalise and reproduce tenuous claims to US and Canadian territorial integrity and sovereignty. The failure of the US and Canadian governments to ratify the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples underscores the legitimacy of indigenous claims to unceded lands, waterways, forests and mountain ranges across North America. Indigenous understandings of the global therefore draw pointed attention to the unfinished business of decolonisation, simultaneously rupturing the assumed coherence of the North American nation space through appeals to both international law and to a growing transnational network of indigenous alliances (Shaw, 2008). Additionally, indigenous scholars and activists often go beyond simply challenging the legal foundations of the settler state by problematising and reimagining concepts such as self-determination, sovereignty, property, democracy, gender/sexuality, pluralism and nationhood as well (Nation to Nation Conversations, 2013).

The #decolonize effort within #occupy therefore, represents only a small fragment of these broader struggles, attempting to take these indigenous critiques directly into #occupy encampments, thereby providing an important case study of not only how theory becomes translated into everyday practice but also how social movements themselves can sometimes be reshaped by prefigurative contestations from within. Existing social movement theory has already drawn our attention to issues of resource mobilisation (McCarthy and Zald, 1979), opportunity structures (McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 2011), and the importance of social networks, repertoires of contention and common cultural/identity/representational frameworks in building sustainable movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Tilly, 2004). Below I mainly focus on the last of these social movement considerations by examining how #decolonize attempted to transform the organising frameworks that guide everyday practices at the three #occupy sites considered.

#Decolonize Canada: Recentering indigenous self-determination on Turtle Island as foundational

Jessica Yee, a Mohawk organiser with the Native Youth Sexual Health Network in Toronto, succinctly summarised indigenous critiques of #occupy's framework in late September 2011: 'There's just one problem: